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COMMON-SENSE INTERPRETATIONS OF SHAKSPERE

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The earnest teacher who is desirous of interpreting literature in accordance with the canons of literary criticism has a hard time of it nowadays. There is so much criticism that loves to play with the recondite and the bizarre. Especially is this true of Shakspearean criticism. From the days of Goethe to the present era of Maeterlinck, there has been an ever-rising flood of criticism. Not all have been as modest as Goethe, who in one of his conversations said: "But we cannot talk about Shakspere. Everything is inadequate. It is true I have touched upon him in my *Wilhelm Meister*, but that is not saying much." Your modern critic differs from Goethe in that he thinks his "system" is adequate and that he has said much.

Since the sane-minded critics have said the sensible things about Shakspere, the only hope the new critic has is that he may say something startling, or evolve a system which will explain Shakspere. The system-maker is usually a German or a disciple of a German philosopher. The trouble with the system-makers is that they are more concerned about their systems than they are about the truth in Shakspere. Matthew Arnold has said something suggestive in regard to the system-makers:

There is the judgment of ignorance, the judgment of incompatibility, the judgment of envy and jealousy. Finally there is the systematic judgment, and this judgment is the most worthless of all. . . . Its author has not really his eye upon the professed object of his criticism at all, but upon something else which he wants to prove by means of that object.

And the trouble with the critic who loves to startle with a theory contrary to all accepted beliefs is that he is narrow. A true criticism of literature is wholesome, generous, vital. The bizarre critic loves to nibble away at a hidden and remote corner

of life. He might be compared to the scientist who knew all about the circulation of blood in a rabbit's hind foot, but had never heard of vertebrates. It is very difficult even for the broad-minded critic to remain in the position of an impartial observer, for, as Goethe somewhere says, we are so ready to mix up our own imaginations and opinions with what comes under our notice. If this is true—and it is—how easy it must be for the man with a theory to run wild. Whitman may have had such critics in mind when he said: "I charge you forever reject those who would expound me, for I cannot expound myself."

Let me illustrate what may be called the Babylonish dialect of the system-maker :

The general movement of the play [*The Merchant of Venice*], therefore, lies in the conflict between the right of Property and the existence of the Individual, and in the Mediation of this conflict through the Family, which owes its origin, in the present case, to that same Individual whom it rescues. . . . All the characters of the play, though possessing peculiarities of their own, must be seen in their relation to this fundamental theme of the work.

There are three essential movements, which may be named in order: the Conflict, the Mediation, the Return. Of the first movement there are two threads, showing, respectively, the Property-conflict and the Love-conflict, though the former is raised to the highest spiritual significance by the underlying religious element. These two threads, moreover, are interwoven in the subtlest manner; still, an analysis has to tear them asunder temporarily. In the first thread the antagonists are Antonio, the Christian, and Shylock, the Jew. . . . The second thread unfolds the Love-conflict, which has here three phases, represented by Portia, Jessica, and Nerissa. The second movement—the Mediation—has the same two threads. . . . the third movement will be the Return.

This extract is typical of about eighteen hundred pages of criticism in three volumes by a critic of Shakspeare. Much of this criticism is helpful and stimulating. But why should common-sense be overlaid with the pedantry of a cumbersome terminology? It is almost burlesque. This is German criticism with a vengeance. Gervinus tells us that Shakspeare's purpose in *The Merchant* is to delineate man in his relation to property. But Ulrici objects, and informs us that the fundamental unity lies in the principle, "*Summum jus summa injuria*;" and Rötcher "goes him one better" by declaring the topic of the play to be

the “dialectics of abstract rights.” Well, well, well! How much the unsophisticated spectator in the theater has lost by his not knowing that before his eyes was enacted the drama of the “dialectics of abstract rights!” For my part I prefer to see in the play what the common people see there—the story of a vindictive Jew whose passion of hatred is thwarted by the nobler passion of love and mercy.

Let us try our hand at over-subtle criticism to see what can be done to overlay simplicity with the jargon of technical expression. One of the familiar Mother Goose melodies is the story of *Jack and Jill*. But this story, coming to us from the primitive past, is full of a deep philosophy. In fact, it is an ethical world-drama in five acts, as can readily be seen.

ACT I

Jack and Jill went up the hill
To fetch a pail of water.

ACT II

Jack fell down and broke his crown,

ACT III

And Jill came tumbling after.

ACT IV

Up Jack got and home did trot,
As fast as he could caper.

ACT V

Dame Jill had the job to plaster his knob
With vinegar and brown paper.

This is a tragical-comical-pastoral in which the first movement, as usual, portrays the wrong, the violation, which in this case is likely a disruption in the family. We may call the first movement the Conflict. And the second movement, consisting as it does of the Return and the Mediation, is the remedial activity closing up the breach in the craniological world, thus foreshadowing the ethical readjustment of the domestic serenity of the hero and heroine. The first thread of the first movement, beginning simultaneously with the hill-climbing, twines and intertwines itself about the unsuspecting masculine bucolic. As a result he

falls, and when he falls, he falls, unlike Lucifer, to rise again. In addition to this twining, the first thread intertwines with the second thread of the first movement. This action and interaction constitute the primordial cataclysm of an attenuated Nemesis. Herein is illustrated Nature's insistence on man's docility to the primary facts of his subliminal consciousness; for why did they go up the hill when water will run down a hill, if it is given but half a chance? After the instinctive feeling of the reader for justice has been satisfied, and before melancholia has fixed its fangs in our bosoms, the Tragic yields to the irresistibly comic; for, lo! Jill, the uncompromisingly sedate Jill, comes tumbling after with picturesque gyrations and genuflections. And this, making the third thread of the first movement, brings us to the end of the third act.

Before taking up the first thread of the second movement, let us find the "turning-point" of the drama. As a well-known expounder of Shakspeare has ingeniously and arithmetically computed, we can find the "turning-point" in a Shakspearean drama by finding the middle of the third act. All that is needed is a little imagination and less arithmetic. Herein we are gratified to discover that the bard of Jack and Jill, with the sublime unconsciousness of genius, has conformed to the latest canons of art. By counting three backward or forward we fix the "turning-point" in the word "came." How almost miraculous it is! This unpretending monosyllabic strong verb in the preterite is the "turning-point" of the comedy; for had Jill failed to come, how could Jack ever have attained either a whole head or a whole heart?

We now enter upon the second movement. The first thread of the second movement runs back to the third thread of the first movement, thus weaving into a connected unity the fabric of the Ethical Whole. The pervasiveness of the Comic is intensified into a sub-climax by Jack's capering with a broken head. The second thread of the second movement shows Woman as the Mediator after the Return. As in all Shakspearean plays, so here too the great Mediator between fallen Man and Violated Justice is lovely Woman, in whose sympathetic hands the vinegar of Nature and

the brown paper of Art are the phenomena of the universe for broken heads and hearts.

To what extent the bizarre in criticism may go we see in the suggestion of one critic that *The Merchant of Venice* was written to arouse sympathy for the despised Jew. If Shakspeare had this intent, he certainly took a most extraordinary method. This point of view is so preposterous that one needs to apologize for showing its absurdity. But, as the view is held, we may be forgiven in calling attention to several matters worth noting.

The most obvious answer to the suggestion of this critic afflicted with the itch for novelty is that pity for Shylock is not the feeling awakened in the spectator of the drama. This interpretation of the play is not the meaning given to it by the common-sense of the people who throng our theaters today. Keeping in mind that sympathy for an alien and oppressed people is the outgrowth of democracy, and that this broadened charity which can call an alien a brother is a spirit peculiarly modern, we might expect the audiences of today to look with gentler feelings upon Shylock. But, in spite of all this, your modern theater-goer does not read into the play a plea for the Jew. If this is true, how much less would an Elizabethan theater-goer three hundred years ago? In 1600, when *The Merchant of Venice* was printed, on its title-page was found: "The Excellent History of the Merchant of Venice. With the extreme cruelty of Shylock the Jew towards the saide Merchant, etc." This certainly does not look like a plea for the Jew. Shakspeare was too large-minded to share in the common race-prejudice of his day, but he was also too far-seeing a playwright to antagonize the people. Play-writing was his business. He wrote to fill the theaters, not to give material to critics of superfine discrimination.

In reading and re-reading the plays of Shakspeare, I have been much impressed with the care he takes to make his meaning clear. Of course there are passages that defy explanation. But here it is to be noted that such passages are usually of a philological difficulty. The difficulty arises from an emended text, from an obsolete word, from a provincialism. The line may be obscure, but the scene, the act, the play itself, is not. Shakspeare seems to

keep in mind the Quintilian precept that one must not only be clear enough to be understood, but so clear that one cannot be misunderstood. In writing plays to be acted, Shakspeare knew that the meaning must be caught on the jump. The spoken word is winged. We have been reading and studying his plays so earnestly that we forget that we can get the meaning of the play by seeing it well acted. "I went to see *The Winter's Tale* recently," said a schoolman to me lately, "and I found that I understood the play and enjoyed it, although I had not an opportunity to read the play before going to the theater." Of course he did. Did the Elizabethans read the play before going on the Thames to the "Globe"?

When Shakspeare fears he may be misunderstood, like a skilful lawyer before an average jury, he repeats the idea in various forms. Take this illustration from *Othello*:

OTHELLO: Is he honest?

IAGO: Honest, my lord?

OTHELLO: Honest, ay, honest.

IAGO: My lord, for aught I know.

OTHELLO: What dost thou think?

IAGO: Think, my lord?

OTHELLO: By heaven, he echoes me,
As if there were some monster in his thought
Too hideous to be shown. . . .
. . . . thou criest "Indeed."
And didst contract and purse thy brow together,
As if thou then hadst shut up in thy brain
Some horrible conceit.

It is as though Shakspeare feared some miserable actor might not catch the subtlety of Iago's tones and so he makes Othello say what the intelligent reader knew before Othello repeats.

Take another passage in the same play. In Act V, scene 1, after Iago has sent Roderigo on his mission, he thus soliloquizes:

. . . . Now, whether he kill Cassio
Or Cassio him, or each do kill the other,
Every way makes my game.

Now, anyone who has read the play up to this point knows what Iago means by his, "Heads I win, tails you lose." We

know that if Cassio is killed, Iago will be freed from a source of exposure, and if Roderigo is killed, he will be freed from the reproaches of a fool from whom he has borrowed money. Shakspeare might have stopped right there, but he does not. He knows an audience of theater-goers does not want to think. So he continues :

. . . . Live Roderigo,
 He calls me to a restitution large
 Of gold and jewels that I bobb'd from him
 As gifts to Desdemona
 It must not be. If Cassio do remain,
 He hath a daily beauty in his life
 That makes me ugly; and, besides, the Moor
 May unfold me to him; there stand I much in peril.

In view of Shakspeare's care to make himself understood, what shall we think of the critic who solemnly insists that Othello had had a guilty love for Emilia, and that Cassio is an effeminate weakling? If Othello was guilty, why does not Shakspeare say so? Not only does he not say so, but he even makes Emilia in her reply to Iago say :

O, fie upon them! Some such squire he was
 That turned your wit the seamy side without,
 And made you to suspect me with the Moor.

Would Shakspeare have Emilia make such a comparison, whose whole force lies in the absurdity of the charge, had he thought of Othello as guilty? And would he have Cassio, along with Malcolm in *Macbeth*, Fortinbras in *Hamlet*, Octavius in *Julius Cæsar*, as the rejuvenating force after the catastrophe, if Cassio is to be considered as a namby-pamby lady's man? In asking this we are not holding Cassio up as a model young man fit to be the hero of a *Ladies' Home Journal* story, but he is not a degenerate.

Of all the plays *Hamlet* presents the most fertile field for the excursions of the recondite critic, and yet *Hamlet* is one of the most simple plays ever written; by "simple" I mean popular. Even a child can be absorbingly interested in a *Hamlet* matinee. This is not the place to touch upon the diverse and far-fetched theories of philosophic expositors of *Hamlet*, but we do wish to suggest that *Hamlet* interpreted by the common-sense of the

teacher can be of vital interest even in the elementary schools. Why should the teacher who really enjoys *Hamlet* be so muddled by trying to reconcile the fantastic theories of novelty-hunting critics as to stand before the class benumbed with the paralysis of over-criticism?

The bane of much of our teaching of literature is our respect for trifles, our tithing of mint and cummin, our lack of a vitality springing from spontaneous enjoyment. The function of literature is to awaken and enrich the spiritual life. Shakspeare has writ large the meaning of life — life with its hates and jealousies, its intrigues and conspiracies, its perverseness and maladjustments; but also with its loves and friendships, its mercy and forgiveness, its reconciliations and adjustments. The teacher who has *lived* can give a more vital interpretation to these meanings through the revelations of his own personality than the critic who is striving after a reputation by constructing a system that shall circumscribe the genius of William Shakspeare.